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We Can't Resign As 'Policeman of the World'

By IRVING KRISTOL

IRVING KRISTOL is a senior editor and vice president of Basic Books, Inc., of New York and co-editor of the quarterly, The Public Interest.

I PRETEND to no greater foresight than the next man on how the present negotiations over Vietnam will proceed. But whether they move swiftly or not, or smoothly or not, it is nevertheless not too early for us to contemplate the meaning of the Vietnam experience for American foreign policy. Moreover, it is extremely important that we do so in the least polemical and most judicious of tempers. For the implications of this experience are nothing less than momentous.

Everyone is to some extent aware that American foreign policy, after this trauma, will never again be the same. But too many people seem to be content to leave it at this, under the impression that, the recent past having been so awful, the future — whatever its shape or form — can only represent an improvement. There is, it seems to me, a shocking lack of recognition of the fact that the debacle in Vietnam initiates a major *crisis* in American foreign policy—and perhaps in world history too.

Thus, there are many people who have concluded rather smugly that, from now on, a chastened United States will be more reluctant to exercise a roving commission as "policeman of the world." The conclusion itself is indisputable: any future Administration will be most hesitant about entering into a new military commitment overseas, and will even think twice before moving to honor an old one.

Still, the fact remains that the moving force behind American foreign policy in these last two decades has been something more than mere presumption or "the arrogance of power." For the world *needs* a measure of policing — the world *does* rely on American power, does count on American power, does look to American power for the preservation of a decent level of international law and order. It wasn't arrogance on our part that cast us in the role of mediator and arbitrator in the Cyprus dispute. Nor was it any kind of narrow self-interest: The nations of Western Europe have far more at stake in avoiding a war between Greece and Turkey than we do, and we certainly could not care less about Cyprus itself, where we have neither bases nor investments. Nevertheless, when that dispute flared up, it was to the United States that both Greece and Turkey naturally turned. Had we decided to keep hands off, a Greco-Turkish war would have been inevitable and the entire Middle East would have been thrown into bloody turmoil, with consequences that pass imagining.

Along these same lines, one can only wonder what the situation in Central Africa would be today if we had not helped establish stability of a kind in the Belgian Congo, an area of no direct concern — economic or military — to us. We intervened there because most of the world thought it was our responsibility to do so—we had the ships, the planes, the men and the money, too.

POWER breeds responsibilities, in international affairs as in domestic—or even private. To dodge or disclaim these responsibilities is one form of the abuse of power. If, after Vietnam, the nations of the world become persuaded that we cannot be counted upon to do the kind of "policeman's" work the world's foremost power has hitherto performed, throughout most of history, we shall unquestionably witness an alarming upsurge in national delinquency and international disorder everywhere. Nor shall we remain unaffected, in our chrome-plated American fortress. Let me propose an example of how drastically we might indeed be affected—one which has received surprisingly little attention.

I happen to think that the Administration's "domino theory" is a perfectly correct description of what an American defeat (as against a settlement that falls short of victory for either side) will lead to. But let us assume that I'm wrong and that the nations of Southeast Asia will remain uncoerced, unintimidated and unsubverted by a Communist Vietnam, allied or not with a Communist China. There still remains the question of how India is going to react to a situation in which the sole and unrivaled Great Power in Asia is a nuclear-armed China. Can anyone doubt that—dominoes or no dominoes—the immediate consequence of an American withdrawal from Asia will be India's arming itself with nuclear weapons?

Even now, the Indian Government is balking at signing the nonproliferation agreement, so laboriously negotiated by the United States and Russia, because it is skeptical of the willingness or ability of these two powers to protect her from nuclear blackmail on the part of China. Should the United States cease being an Asian military power—as is now being urged by so many—this skepticism will turn into certitude. India will then start arming itself with nuclear weapons—it has had the technical capacity to do so for some time now. And if India proceeds, can Pakistan be far behind? How do we contemplate a world in which India and Pakistan glower at each other, their fingers curled around nuclear triggers? *That* is the kind of thing which has been at stake in Vietnam.

Or take another example, in another part of the world. If Israel becomes convinced that the United States, after its bitter experience in Vietnam, is unable or unwilling to

use its military power in the Middle East to assure Israel's survival as a nation—if this power is all symbol and no substance—it will inevitably start constructing nuclear weapons. Egypt, of course, will do likewise, with or without Russian assistance. How do we contemplate such a confrontation? That, too, has been at stake in Vietnam.

IT is exceedingly strange that so many people who have a sincere and passionate concern over the Bomb should be oblivious to the fact that we live in a nuclear age. To listen to self-appointed leaders of the "peace movement," one would think that the only danger posed by the Bomb is that some crazy general in the Pentagon will abruptly decide to use it. Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult for official United States spokesmen to discuss this matter in public. How can the State Department or the White House talk bluntly of the dangers of a lot of kooky little (or not so little) nations playing around with nuclear weapons? How can Dean Rusk publicly assert that we don't trust India, or Pakistan, or Egypt, or Brazil, or whomever with nuclear arms?

Protocol quite properly forbids such candor. But protocol does not affect the basic realities, which are available to inspection by anyone who is willing to look at this world with eyes unclouded by ideology. It is a world which, without "policing," will almost certainly blow itself to bits.

It is because this reality of world politics is so blithely ignored or passed over that I find much of the present controversy over American foreign policy so unreal. Will the United States go isolationist or neo-isolationist as a result of Vietnam, as some fear and others hope? But what can "going isolationist" mean, in today's world? There is no special American atmosphere; the air we breathe can be radioactively polluted by the actions of men, thousands of miles away, contesting issues in which, strictly speaking, we have no kind of national interest. What it comes down to, indeed, is that in the nuclear age no Great Power can responsibly define its national interest in "strictly speaking" terms.

I also find only a little less unreal the notion that the United States should be strictly selective in its international commitments—avoiding all cases where we are likely to get more deeply involved than we have determined beforehand we are willing to be. Things just do not work that way. "Strictly selective" commitments are as much an anachronism as a "strictly speaking" national interest. Like any policeman, a Great Power can remain prudently aloof from various imbroglios. A policeman on the beat can turn his eyes away from family quarrels, no matter how bitter and noisy, or from

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'Policeman of the world' (cont.)

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petty bookmaking, no matter how flagrant. But if the family quarrel should become a street riot, or petty bookmaking be taken over by a syndicate, he has no choice but to intervene. Similarly, the United States need not—and does not—meddle in everything happening all over the globe. But to try to catalogue our commitments to suit our convenience is really not within our power. It may be recalled that Dean Acheson did precisely that with regard to South Korea; that "non-commitment" quickly turned into a major war for us.

Besides, the truth of the matter is that, because we are a Great Power, we are a "committed" nation without knowing what our commitments precisely are. Our commitments are necessarily defined, to a considerable extent, by circumstance and contingency. What, for instance, is the exact nature and extent of our commitment to the survival of the State of Israel? I don't know; the United States Government doesn't know, either; nor do the Governments of Israel, Egypt or the Soviet Union. What we will do to insure Israel's survival will depend on the kind of trouble it is in; it will also depend on the kind of trouble we are in, at the particular moment. This state of affairs will offend only the prissily tidy-minded. A precise and public definition of our commitment might, at some point, force us to choose between a nuclear war with the Soviet Union or China and a humiliating capitulation. The fewer such public definitions of our commitments we burden ourselves with, the better off we are.

ABOVE all, I find unreal the idea, so popular on the liberal-left, that our troubles arise from something called "the cold war," and especially from a dogmatic opposition to anything carrying the odor of something called "Communism." True, some leading figures in American life—mainly in the Republican party, so far as I can see—talk this way. And it is unquestionably true that one major aim of American foreign policy is to establish or sustain a friendly and hospitable world environment.

But this last aim is shared by all Great Powers. It is attached to the very meaning of the term "Great Power." And the Administration has not been carrying on any kind of doctrinaire, ideological crusade against Communism, wherever and whenever. We are, for instance, scrupulously refraining from intervening in the present anti-Soviet and anti-Communist turmoil in Eastern Europe; we are not even saying very much about it. And there are quite a few of the new nations in Africa that have pro-Communist regimes without the Administration's even seeming to take any anxious notice of the fact.

INDEED the "cold war," properly speaking, is no longer a terribly significant fact of international life. Our conflict with the Soviet Union by now has few ideological overtones; during the last Middle East crisis, neither we nor the Soviet Union talked very much about "Communism" or "capitalism," except in a purely routine and ritualistic way. Our conflict with the Soviet Union today is much more a traditional struggle between Great Powers, in the 19th-century sense, with each protagonist trying to tilt the balance of power in its own direction. Were the Communist party of the Soviet Union to be replaced tomorrow by a Romanov Czar, this conflict would endure, and probably in much the same way.

The same is not yet true of China—but I suspect it soon will be. The Chinese Communist regime still sees itself, and frequently behaves, as the ideological center of a universal and apocalyptic socio-political doctrine. But with every passing year the regime becomes more chauvinistically Chinese and less Communist, in any familiar meaning of that term. In its relations with other nations in Asia and Africa, China seems impelled to act in an overbearing Chinese way, rather than in a calculating Communist way. And though we know little about the inner turmoil now taking place within China's political system, it is reasonable to suppose that the eventual upshot will be the emergence of a China which—like the U.S.S.R.—will be more interested in extending its national power than in selflessly propagating any ideology.

But there's no hope precisely. For, in the nuclear age,

has been the cardinal principle of our foreign policy to discourage, as effectively as we can, other powers from engaging in them.

BUT, after Vietnam, how does it stand with this cardinal principle of foreign policy? It stands very badly, I think—worse than anyone seems to realize. And though hunting for scapegoats—on the part of both left and right—is already beginning to look like a popular American sport, this is a futile distraction. The sad truth is that there are no "guilty men."

The Johnson Administration will have to take responsibility for the Vietnam debacle—but responsibility is not exactly the same thing as blame. The foreign policy of this Administration was no capricious innovation; it had been preestablished (even institutionalized) during the preceding 20 years. But it was the Administration's bad luck to encounter a crisis that drained this policy of its credibility.

Americans do not like to talk about "bad luck" in politics—we are powerfully inclined to think that we are always masters of our fate. But just as an individual's life and career can be radically affected by sheer luck, so can a nation's. The Eisenhower Administration was blessed by an almost uncanny good fortune. It actually landed American marines in Lebanon—an event which, though dimly remembered, is hardly believable—and got them out unscathed. The Kennedy Administration had more mixed luck in foreign policy. During the Cuban missile crisis it brought the world closer than it had ever been, or has been since, to all-out nuclear war. A slight incident, a misunderstanding of instructions on the part of Soviet or American military men, even a temporary indisposition of one of the leading political actors, could have tilted the world over the brink. But it all worked out well, and even came to be regarded as a splendid victory for resolute statesmen.

The luck of the Johnson Administration has been close to awful. To begin with, the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese have fought more obstinately, and far more effectively, than anyone anticipated, while our own military planning has shown itself grossly inept. Neither of these facts was predictable. In addition, this Administration had to conduct its foreign policy in the midst of a racial crisis, a monetary crisis and a generational crisis. Not one of these crises was of its making, but their convergence created a climate of opinion that made the Vietnam war the center of an immense controversy. The only way to end this controversy, which threatens to tear the nation apart, was either to win a quick victory in Vietnam or simply to scuttle. Neither alternative was available to the Administration, for various reasons, and so it has had to stumble on, amid growing recrimination and bitterness.

AS a result of this streak of bad luck, the United States found itself trying to exercise a kind of "imperial" military power in Southeast Asia, while under the influence of all kinds of "anticolonialist" inhibitions. It is the presence of these inhibitions—not any undue or reactionary affection for the landlords or merchants or generals—that has prevented us from reshaping the South Vietnamese Army into an effective fighting force (as we were able to do in Korea, under the mantle of a U.N. mandate), or reforming the various governing institutions of that nation, or simply stepping in and doing on our own a lot of important little things that obviously needed to be done. Yet such inhibitions are woven into the very substance of American policy, and cannot be expunged without simultaneously doing profound harm to the spirit of our

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democracy and risking the perversion of our own democratic institutions. We may be an "imperial" power in terms of the responsibilities we assume, but we can never be an "imperialist" power in the way we cope with those responsibilities.

The framework within which our foreign policy must operate is reasonably flexible, but there are limits. And in Vietnam, we ran up against one of these limits and have had to fall back in disarray. It is now clear that, in practicing the policy of "containment," we cannot intervene in a situation where such intervention might put us, for any length of time, in a "colonialist" position. We started out, in Vietnam, with what seemed to be a traditional "intervention"—limited in scope, intention and time. We found ourselves involved in a minor (if bloody) war which we could not win, since in order even to have a chance to win we would, in effect, have had to transform South Vietnam into an American colony. We should have had to appoint American officers to give South Vietnamese troops the leadership they have been lacking, American proconsuls to govern Vietnam provinces and institute overdue reforms, American educators to overhaul the absurdly antiquated educational system that the French left behind them, etc., etc. We just were not—and are not—going to do that: it goes too abrasively against the American grain. And not having done it in Vietnam, we are not going to do it elsewhere. There is not going to be any American colonial empire, acquired in some fit of "absent-mindedness."

BUT it is more than the anticolonialist heritage of the American republic that, as we can now see, sets limits to our policy of "containment." There is also the very structure of American society today.

The policy of "containment" has assumed—must assume—a democratic citizenry prepared to fight an interminable series of "frontier wars." This assumption was gravely shaken during the Korean war, at the end of which a great many people solemnly said, "Never again." But memories fade quickly in politics, especially when they are inconvenient. And it would have been highly inconvenient, to put it mildly, for the makers of our foreign policy to believe that they could not really rely on "limited wars" to prevent the world from moving into grave disequilibrium. So they decided to think otherwise; and, for a while, they seemed to be correct in doing so. Up until only a few years ago, one could listen to Administration officials speaking enthusiastically of the "firm resolve and temperate mood" of the American people, prepared to "shoulder their responsibilities" as a world power. No one in Washington is singing that kind of song today.

It is now as clear as can be that a modern social democracy—whether it be the United States, Britain or France—cannot do what most thoughtful students of foreign policy agree it ought to do, in its own interest and the world's. It cannot engage, for any long period of time, in those "limited wars" that are necessary to preserve international law and order. The Great Powers of the 19th century could do so because they relied on tightly knit professional armies; because their small, homogeneous educated classes (the makers, to all intents and purposes, of "public opinion") identified themselves with national *grandeur;* because economic growth and social welfare were not then thought to be the overriding

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66We may be an 'imperial' power in terms of the responsibilities we assume, but we can never be an 'imperialist' power in the way we cope with those responsibilities.99

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obligation of Government; because the mass of the people was imbued with a kind of unthinking chauvinism that made it deferential to any official definition of foreign policy. In other words, because they were not 20th-century social democracies.

Today, it is quite otherwise. Our educated classes are providing the social base for a new left which, like the old, regards foreign policy as a sinister distraction from the urgent need of social transformation at home. Our working class, still highly patriotic and not at all left in its ideology, nevertheless is resentful of any overseas commitments that require it to forgo those annual advances in its material comfort it now regards as "natural." Our middle class is politically belligerent and is impatient with any foreign policy that burdens it with new taxes. In addition, we have our "underclass"—largely Negro—that can understandably imagine a set of national priorities very different from that of the State Department's.

In short, it seems to be the case, after Vietnam, that American military intervention in world affairs will henceforth take one of two forms. Either it might, if sufficiently provoked, move toward a nuclear confrontation, as during the Cuban missile crisis. Or it might, if the Government is *absolutely* certain it can bring overwhelming force to bear, rely upon swift sorties, as in the Dominican crisis. But that large middle ground, upon which American foreign policy has rested since World War II, has now been cut away from under our feet.

Just what this will mean, in detail, it is too early to say. Our thinking has not yet caught up with our new condition. We still keep 200,000 American troops in Western Europe, despite the fact that no one can now believe they will ever fight the limited war they are there for. Only the other day Theodore Sorensen remarked casually, during a television discussion, that no future President could permit another Castro to emerge in the Caribbean (or, presumably, in Central America). He did not indicate how the President would prevent this, now that what might be called "the Vietnam option" is foreclosed. After all, Senator Robert A. Kennedy, whom Mr. Sorensen advises, has flatly announced that there must be "no more Vietnams." There would seem to be a contradiction here—not only between two men but at the heart of our foreign policy itself.

Some Administration advisers — notably Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski of Columbia—are stressing the importance of regional alliances among the nations directly involved to cope with future regional crises. But the Administration is not pushing this idea with any vigor, perhaps because it has no great faith in it. (In truth, it is hard to see any such alliance—or any such coping—in South America, for instance.) And no one seriously thinks that the United Nations can, in our lifetime, fill the vacuum that the retrenchment of United States commitments will create.

AS I see it, therefore, the end of the Vietnam war will not conclude our "time of troubles," as so many now assume, but rather inaugurate a new era of even greater turbulence in international affairs—and with domestic repercussions that are bound to be massive, if for the moment unpredictable. The major threat is not that certain areas will now fall under some kind of Communist control — though, if this should happen in Latin America, it will be of no little concern to us. The truly frightening possibility is that, with an American foreign policy that forsakes sustained and limited military commitments—that abandons the policeman's role most of the world has come to expect of us even while bitterly resenting it (who likes policemen?)—those nations which feel their security threatened will have no alternative but to rely on their own nuclear arsenals. It is even conceivable that United States foreign policy will wander erratically between extremes: neoisolationist up to a point, and then —when the pressure of events becomes unendurable — reliance on (at least tactical) nuclear weapons.

It may yet turn out to be one of the great ironies of world history that the United States and the Soviet Union should have succeeded in negotiating a nonproliferation agreement at the very moment when such an agreement could only be another scrap of paper. ☐